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ABSTRACT

From fall 1985 to fall 1991, the enrollment mix at the Community College of Denver (CCD) has grown to reflect the diverse center city population that the college serves, including increases in the percentages of minorities and women. The changing CCD student body presents new challenges to the college's academic and student support programs. The transformation of the CCD student body has accentuated the need for accountability, particularly at the academic program level. At CCD, the outcome of the new need for accountability has not been a self-study for accreditation, but rather a proposed "special emphasis" study for accreditation. The special emphasis study will include an overview document, an accountability report, and planning documents. A steering committee will be drawn from the chairs or representatives of a number of councils and committees. The novelty of the special emphasis study is the focus on information management to make planning and accountability routine activities at the program level. The study will explore how to improve internal CCD operations and the fit among job performance, institutional goals, and institutional standards. In addition, the study will foster an effective institutional culture, which is closely linked to information management. To create an organizational culture that integrates research, planning, and accountability into continuous self-study at an operational level, college leaders must pay attention to their role as information managers. (JMC)

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ACCREDITATION AS AN OUTCOME OF RESEARCH, PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO SELF-STUDY AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF DENVER

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Accreditation as an Outcome of Research, Planning and Accountability: An Alternative Approach to Self-Study

Community College of Denver
Tim Griffin, Marlene Hall and Byron McClenney

I. Introduction

The Community College of Denver is about to conduct a Special Emphasis study instead of a Self-Study for accreditation. In this paper we will describe the manner in which planning and accountability have laid the groundwork for this Special Emphasis study. We will also demonstrate that research, planning and accountability are but three different aspects of information management, and that information management is the key to building an effective institutional culture through routine, rather than episodic, self-study.

The general goal of our Special Emphasis study, as stated in our approved proposal to the North Central Association, is " to evaluate our planning and accountability processes for the purposes of better integration and institutional improvement". Integration here refers to the combination of research, planning and accountability activities within self-study at the program level. In our plan the essential focus of the self-study concerns the manner in which faculty and staff get information (or do not get information) to make decisions.

Based upon our experience, information management is an important activity for all faculty and staff. Information management may either facilitate or hinder the growth of an effective institutional culture. For this reason, college leadership should pay attention to the way information is produced, distributed and consumed within their institution. Program "consumer demand" for information needs to be a special focus if self-study is to become a continuous activity at this level of college organization.

The following section of this paper provides our working definitions of institutional culture and information management as illustrated by the CCD experience before and after the benchmark year 1985. Next, we outline planning and accountability at CCD, and the manner in which we will integrate both in a Special Emphasis approach to self-study for accreditation. In our conclusion, we will make some general observations about the promotion of effective institutional culture through information management.

II. Definitions and Background

We consider institutional culture to be the shared information that allows faculty and staff to adapt to and, when possible, to modify the internal and external CCD environment. Institutional culture is

a model of the college and its environment. Based upon the collective experience of institutional culture, faculty and staff interpret relationships and events as either significant or insignificant. It also provides the basis for faculty and staff responsiveness, or unresponsiveness.

Institutional culture is not static but continuously transforms new data into information by filtering "signals" from the CCD environment. Accordingly, we define information management as observing that which the organization and it's environment attends to, and then acting upon those observations. It is not the attempt to control information, since such an attempt would negate the development of an effective organizational culture. Information management is a function of college leadership, which includes both faculty and administration.

Because of the range of variation in the viewpoints of CCD faculty and staff, and continuous change in the institutional environment, CCD institutional culture is neither manageable or controllable. However, it can be encouraged to change in a particular direction. Over the past six years, we have encouraged the development of a collective response to the external environment through wider faculty and staff participation in planning and accountability. Through our Special Emphasis approach to self-study, we hope to encourage a similar transformation of the internal environment.

CCD's environment and institutional culture began a major transformation in 1985 when it became a free-standing institution. From 1970 to 1985, CCD belonged to a tri-campus Community College of Denver System. Central administration conducted planning in response to the metropolitan community. Internal administrative planning at each campus entailed response to, and frequently reaction against, initiatives handed down from a central administration. Individual campus programs conducted planning for student outcomes.

Given these antecedent conditions, the college required major transformation to realize its potential as a free-standing institution. This was addressed through the installation of a college-wide planning process in 1986.

III. Planning

Since 1985, CCD has sought to establish strong connections with the community, initiate and sustain growth, and attain financial stability. This has been accomplished through research that identifies the educational needs of Denver, a strategic planning process to address those needs, and the use of evaluation indicators that measure success in fulfilling those needs.

The full CCD planning process starts with research: faculty and staff develop a series of white papers concerning community, student and college characteristics. In the last round of CCD planning, the following research projects were conducted by faculty and staff.

- o Denver Demographic Trends
- o Community Social Problems
- o Economy and Technological Change
- o Nature and Needs of CCD Students
- o Nature and Needs of CCD Faculty
- o Nature and Needs of CCD Staff
- o Governance and Finance

The issues delineated in the white papers are then reviewed by the college advisory council, and by the faculty and staff as a whole. The issues that receive top priority are directed to a college-wide planning committee for translation into planning priorities. To do this, the planning committee weighs the white paper issues in terms of:

- o the mission and role of the college;
- o environmental opportunities and constraints;
- o institutional strengths and weaknesses;
- o institutional values;
- o alternative courses of action.

The committee next develops an action priorities list for the president. After reviewed by faculty and staff at an open hearing, the priorities list is sent to the president and college council for final approval. The action priorities are then distributed to all units of the college which, in turn, develop their own plans based upon the priorities.

The unit plans are combined into area plans for instruction, student services, administration and presidential staff. The president develops a college plan based upon the area plans. The college units then revise their plans to correspond with the college plan within a one page limit. The revised plans are used to develop unit and area budgets, and to guide budget allocation.

Over the past seven years, the common goal of both CCD planning and accountability has been penetration of the underserved core city. The enrollment mix of the college has grown to reflect the diverse center city population that it serves. Enrollment has grown from 3,047 students in Fall, 1985 to 6,560 students in Fall, 1991. The following table illustrates that the student body has become more diverse as it has increased in size.

	Fall 85 % of All Students	Fall 90 % of All Students
Minority Students	27%	45%
Women	52%	61%
First-Time College Students	24%	48%
Students Aged 18-21 Years	14%	32%
Students from Denver	45%	52%

The new CCD student body presents new challenges to academic and student support programs. 1990 Census data shows that Denver is developing all the major problems of other large U.S. cities at the core of metropolitan areas (Griffin 1991). CCD will play a pivotal role in addressing these problems through educational service delivery.

The CCD planning process already contains many elements of a self-study and we plan to build upon these elements in our Special Emphasis study. The CCD action priorities are also evidence of accountability to the community. By using accreditation requirements in the design of planning and accountability, we anticipate less difficulty in going through the accreditation process (cf. Cosgrove 1989).

IV. Accountability

The transformation of the CCD student body has accentuated the need for accountability, particularly at the academic program level. CCD began an accountability program in 1985 through a Title III grant. However, accountability mandates from the state legislature have been the most important factor in the way the CCD accountability program has evolved to date. In attempting to balance external mandates with internal assessment needs, the external mandates have exerted the greatest influence.

Initially, CCD accountability efforts involved instructional faculty and administrators as part of Title III activities to develop institutional and program competencies. The process focused upon assessment data by program area within each of the four service areas of the college. These four areas, as specified in the CCD Mission Statement, are 1) transfer, 2) vocational education, 3) continuing education and 4) developmental studies. Although the four areas provide the structure of our current plan, the development of a "bottom-up" approach to accountability was disrupted by a "top-down" accountability mandate from the state legislature.

In 1987, the Colorado legislature passed House Bill 1187, an omnibus package of higher education reforms. The bill stipulated that institutions "be held accountable for demonstrable improvements in student knowledge, capacities and skills between entrance and graduation". No funding was appropriated for institutional accountability. However, the statute did authorize the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to withhold up to 2% of the appropriation of any institution that did not comply with the accountability policy.

The Colorado Commission on Higher Education implemented HB 1187 by directing institutions to develop accountability plans. The CCHE evaluation criteria for the institutional plans resemble self-study criteria in format. In content, the criteria assess whether the institution is:

- documenting changes attributable to assessment;
- informing students and the public about such changes;
- keeping track of accountability costs at the institution;
- addressing minority student data;
- informing students of outcome expectations;
- reviewing institutional goal accomplishment;
- analyzing outcomes in general education, specific disciplines, retention and completion, and student and alumni satisfaction.

The history of student tracking at CCD illustrates how accountability has prompted internal change over the past three accountability report iterations. The CCD student tracking system was developed and installed in 1989. From 1989 to 1990, the first round of tracking data demonstrated that the major source of attrition for entering CCD students was not academic failure, but dropping out, especially in the first semester. The first round of data and studies also led to the general characterization of an "at-risk" student as 25 years or younger, minority and in a transfer degree program.

These findings, along with analysis of testing data, contributed to a successful application for a Title III grant that established (1) an Academic Early Warning System and (2) basic skills computer labs in English and math. The findings also prompted joint meetings between Instruction and Student Services to discuss problems in the CCD advising system. A new Teaching-Learning Center encouraged re-enforcement of basic skills across the curriculum through scholarships for faculty projects.

From 1990 to 1991, the second round of tracking data isolated a gap between the time a student entered CCD and actual degree program entry. This finding led to the decision to develop entry procedures for every degree and certificate-granting program in the college. For example, most students who declared a Nursing major required a year's remediation before actual entry to the nursing program.

Many students get "lost in the cracks" during this period of time, and this results in dropping out or settling for a credential with less demanding general education requirements.

Test scores were merged with cohort tracking data in the second round. This led to the discovery that non-native English speakers had low mathematics achievement and required curriculum and tutoring that combined English comprehension with practice in numerical operations. Student tracking data for developmental studies students showed that these students were as successful in upper level courses as those without a developmental studies background if they took upper level courses. The real matter of concern is that so few actually take them.

Beginning in 1991, the student tracking system has continued to be at the core of a variety of efforts to improve student academic success. It is being used to target high risk students, to develop an enrollment management system, and will become a basic component in an improved system of academic program review. In terms of information management, CCD student tracking data promotes a "flattening" of internal CCD organization through a common student-centered data base. This data base elucidates student flow through the entire institution and, when that flow is interrupted, provides further analysis of impediments and attrition patterns.

The internal changes prompted by student tracking have been initiated on a 'top- down" basis in response to external mandates from CCHE and the state legislature. A "top-down" response was inevitable due to the "consumer protection" nature of HB 1187. Our "top down", "whole institution" response was also prompted by the explicit CCHE need to standardize reporting formats, and the implicit possibility of inter-institutional comparison.

Unfortunately, a "top-down", "whole-institution" response has meant that faculty involvement has principally been in data production to meet institution-wide goals rather than data consumption for specific program improvement. CCHE mandates have actually required data collection and processing in forms other than those which faculty and staff require for program improvement. Accreditation now gives us the opportunity to modify our accountability and planning procedures to address internal program improvement.

V. Linking Planning and Accountability in a Special Emphasis Study

So far, CCD planning and accountability have triggered two distinct patterns of internal change which we call "transformational" and "transactional" (Birnbaum 1988, 204-206). Transformational changes are those which have occurred to accomplish goals that are primarily handed down from administration. Transactional changes are those that have occurred to accomplish goals that are largely generated by faculty and staff.

The past history of CCD has required an initial emphasis upon transformational changes through the planning process. Although accountability efforts at CCD began with an internal, transactional emphasis, legislation and policy mandates also made CCD accountability largely a matter of transformational change. However, we feel that in the long run transactional change will be most efficacious in building an effective institutional culture. We plan to initiate transactional changes through the integration of planning and accountability in self-study at the program level.

NCHEMS (1992) notes that the accreditors are now asking institutions to do three new things: (1) state intended educational goals in clear and "assessable" terms, (2) gather and analyze a comprehensive body of evidence about goal accomplishment and (3) demonstrate that they regularly use the resulting evidence to make changes or improvements. To meet these requirements, institutions must approach them as "a systemic process--beginning with the goals themselves, and ending with an action plan for continuous improvement".

To take a systemic approach to the new accreditation requirements, NCHEMS recommends an information plan for self-study that "begins with a systemic audit of what's present and what's missing, that coordinates what's present with a few comprehensive and well-structured new data collection efforts, and that structures the resulting data around a few important questions that need to be answered". In our Special Emphasis study, we take a similar approach. However, we go somewhat further than the NCHEMS college-wide "information plan". We intend to conduct an evaluation of how well our current planning and accountability processes enable individual CCD programs to meet their program goals, and those of the college.

The Special Emphasis study will include the following components:

1. Overview Document - The General Institutional Requirements will be addressed along with the documentation of institutional purposes and a description of the organization. Responses to the most recent NCA report will be included.

2. Accountability Report - The fourth iteration of the annual process to deal with student achievement will be available to help demonstrate that CCD is accomplishing its purposes.

3. Planning Documents - "Strategies for 1994 and Beyond," "Priorities for 1993-94" and plans for 1993-94 will be available as a result of the annual update completed by May, 1993. These documents will further demonstrate that CCD is accomplishing its purposes and will clearly show the ability of CCD to continue accomplishing its purposes.

A Steering Committee will be drawn from the chairs or representatives of the following:

- o Teaching/Learning Committee
- o Academic Standards Committee
- o Accountability Committee
- o Faculty Council
- o Classified Council
- o Administrative Council
- o Student Representative Council
- o Planning Council

A coordinator will be designated and the kick-off will occur in August, 1992. In addition to the documents cited above, program faculty will receive a package of accountability data to initiate self-study of their own program. They will use the documents and data to conduct an audit of what data is present and what is absent for their program, undertake some new data collection efforts, and develop any special data element and study cohort definitions to structure their data for cross-program comparison.

The novelty of our Special Emphasis study is in our focus upon information management to make planning and accountability routine activities at the program level. As we examine planning and accountability data through self-study, our goal will be to isolate the types of routine planning and accountability information faculty and staff need for program improvement. In doing so, we hope to make faculty and staff consumers of information as well as producers.

The Special Emphasis study of information use and distribution will also teach us how to improve internal CCD operations. In terms of day-to-day operations, the integration of accountability and planning within CCD institutional culture is reflected in communication patterns. We anticipate that self-study should improve the fit among job performance, institutional goals and institutional standards by improving communication.

We also anticipate that our Special Emphasis study will foster an effective institutional culture. This is based on the premise that the degree to which individual members of an organization can autonomously and effectively function depends upon their ability to access information. In organizations, as in any culture, to access information, people must have the skills and the authorization to do so. As educators are aware, an effective way to deny participation in a society or in an organization is to withhold training in required skills.

VI. Concluding Observations about Effective Institutional Culture

In our experience, institutional culture and information management are closely linked. Culture filters "signals" from both the internal and external environment of a group. It determines what the group pays attention to, even what the group sees and does not see. To create an organizational culture that integrates research, planning and accountability into continuous self-study at an operational level, college leadership must pay attention to their role as information managers.

As information managers, college leadership should not simply provide information, but strategically target information through formal and informal communication networks. However, while institutional leadership plays an influential role, it is not the sole determinant of organizational culture. Leaders can and do initiate the direction in which a group's culture develops, particularly if they are the main interpreters of data as trivial or significant. But to build a truly effective institutional culture, leadership must also pay attention to the "consumer demand" for information, particularly at the program level.

Leadership, authority and information are closely related within an institutional culture. The old saw that "knowledge is power" captures the aspect of information as a kind of currency for negotiating one's position in an organization. However, the saying is far too simplistic in its emphasis upon individual goals.

While power is negotiated, authority comes by virtue of one's position in an organizational culture. In other words, one may have powerful knowledge but not be in a position to use it. Furthermore, a leader may have knowledge, and be in a position to use it, but to get things done effectively, must share a common information base with the group. In technical terms, this information base is commonly referred to as a "decision support system", something that we are now building at CCD.

In conclusion, we wish to point out that we have learned the relationship between institutional culture and information management by trial and error as much as by conscious effort. Each institutional culture has unique aspects produced by historical background and the personalities of individual faculty and staff. We hope that our experience suggests ways in which faculty and staff at other institutions may discover the nature of their own institutional culture, and seek ways to make it support, rather than inhibit, creativity, risk-taking and effectiveness.

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